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## ***Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang – ‘Noir’ Parody with a Satirical Edge?***

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*Mamat Khalid's Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang (2008), which focuses upon an intriguing story of an investigative journalist having to confront mysterious disappearances, conspiracies and ghostly presence is a rambunctious black-and-white send-up of (Hollywood) film noir. The film is a strikingly self-reflexive display of generic possibilities as cultural performance, for it flaunts an intertextual style, consciously showcasing its production process, and constantly 'quotes' from other cultural texts. This essay argues that Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang works as both a parody and a satire. As a parody, the film's target is concerned with formal and aesthetic elements. Mamat deftly interweaves a melange of film genres, ranging from Hollywood noir to old Malay horror. As a satire, the film is comedy with an edge, with its target being social and political in some way. Within its narrative, the film pokes fun at contemporary Malaysian society and politics in a subtle, underlying manner, thus providing the viewer with a fascinating subtext. By exploring the film's generic discursivities in terms of Mamat's parodic strategy and satirical mode, the ultimate aim of this essay is to sanction a more appropriate generic label for the film.*

*Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang (2008, lit. When the Full Moon Rises)* remains the only local film in 2008 which has spawned a host of relentless reactions and debates, albeit the lukewarm response it received among local moviegoers upon its release.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps one of the most fascinating issues surrounding its reception is its generic approach employed by the director Mamat Khalid; this includes its attempt at being filmed in black and white. The film has been ubiquitously labeled as 'neo-noir,' a term promulgated by Mamat himself.<sup>2</sup> In the context of film studies and Hollywood cinema, 'neo-noir' is now the most widely and accepted term for those films which, from the mid-1960s on, relate to or draw

upon the notion, the image and the putative conventions of film noir, and, directly or indirectly, on some of the films featuring centrally within most versions of the basic noir canon (Steve Neale, 2000). Whilst disagreeing with Mamat, S. B. Toh (2008), in his review of *Kala Malam*, states that, “while *Kala Malam* is indeed, as the director says, a tribute to 1950s moviemaking, it is not ‘neo-noir,’ as he would have it.” While evaluating *Kala Malam* within the canonical framework of ‘neo-noir,’ Toh ends up giving the film an unfavourable review. On the other hand, A. Wahab Hamzah (2008), reviewing *Kala Malam* and citing the director’s labeling of the film as ‘neo-noir,’ appraises the film by examining its ‘noir’ elements based upon the basic noir canon as exemplified by Hollywood noirs of the 1940s and 1950s. Whereas, Derek Elley (2008), in his brief review of *Kala Malam* in *Variety*, terms the film as ‘spoof noir-cum-horror pic.’ Paolo Bertolin (2008), writing another brief review of the film, describes it as, “a luxury coherently bestowed to an enchanting pastiche of classic film genres that implement a thin – and openly preposterous – premise of film noir with elements from musical, horror and melodrama.”<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the mention of ‘a thin – and openly preposterous premise of film noir,’ in my opinion, seems to nullify such notions as bona-fide ‘noir’ or even ‘neo-noir’ as the film’s generic status, though they may provide the film’s loose generic frame; or at least, the mention warrants an in-depth examination of the film’s generic proclivity. Unlike terms such as the ‘western,’ or the ‘gangster’ film, which are relatively uncontroversial, ‘film noir’ has a more tenuous critical status. Can *Kala Malam* be simply conceived of as ‘noir,’ ‘neo-noir’ or rather ‘spoof noir’ (noir parody)? Since ‘genre’ has been a fluid, problematic concept, by acknowledging ‘noir’ as a *legitimate* film genre, this essay attempts to explore the film’s generic discursivities; I shall first demonstrate the salient ‘noir’ elements that pervade the entire film, and then go on to examine its parodic strategy as well as its satirical mode.

In many ways, as I shall show, *Kala Malam* does utilize the conventions of Hollywood noir. The film recalls and critiques film canons and their established sets of rules and conventions. As Dan Harries (2002) remarks, yet the most fascinating aspect of film parody is not so much its recitation and disavowal of genre codes, but rather its *resuscitation* of genre-based rules and conventions. I shall also examine some of the ways in which *Kala Malam*’s critiquing activity adheres to and often perpetuates the very codes it is spoofing – generating more or less a ‘blueprint’ of the targeted genre (that is, film noir) by laying bare the genre’s structure and conventions. By this, I hope to analyze *Kala*

*Malam* and discuss many of the ways in which the conventions of the Hollywood noir and the mechanisms of parody operate in tandem to both situate and subvert the viewing experience, therefore resulting in the perpetuation of a revised yet intact film noir. I would further argue that a film like *Kala Malam* not only functions as a 'comedy' in its own right, but also pays off of a number of different generic blueprints, including the horror, musical and melodrama film genres, as mentioned earlier. In general, film parody depends on the associated spectatorial activity that accompanies the watching of film genre. Typically, films that operate from within a particular genre execute their systems of iconography, narrative and style in a calculated and economic manner in order to ensure a strong identification with that genre. Altman (1999) adds that, "if spectators are to experience films in terms of their genre, films must leave no doubt as to their generic identity; instant recognizability must be assumed" (cited in Harries, 2002, p. 282). One of the enduring principles of genre spectatorship is a previous knowledge of the genre and the pleasures that come from 'recognizing' the genre's elements and codes across films (Harries, 2002).

## **Reiterating 'Noir' Codes and Conventions**

Before I embark on Mamat's parodic strategy, I would like to demonstrate that *Kala Malam*, with its highly stylized nature, exhibits some nourish qualities. A film parody, first and foremost, needs to go to great lengths to establish a clear connection to the genre(s) it is spoofing/parodying. This is pursued through processes of 'reiteration' and acts to increase the chances that the spectator will recognize both the blueprint and the deviations from that model. A major source of reiteration, particularly in genre parodies, is the use of iconography (such as settings and props) resembling or identical to those of the target objects. In *Kala Malam*, the stylistic element such as the low-key lighting with chiaroscuro effects, as I will discuss later, is a source of 'reiteration' as this certainly establishes its connection to the source text. In this sense, the film, as I shall demonstrate, takes great care in reproducing the iconic elements of the source genre. Certainly, the obvious choice to shoot in black and white made it easy to harken back to the glory days of 'film noir,' as well as old Malay films, when colour was an expensive option. Steve Neale (2000), writing of genre and Hollywood, delineates some of the features associated with 'film noir:'

The use of voice-over and flashback, the use of high contrast lighting and other 'expressionist' devices, the focus on mentally, emotionally and physically vulnerable characters, the interest in psychology, the culture of distrust marking relations between male and female characters, and the downbeat emphasis on violence, anxiety, death, crime and compromised morality ... (p. 174)

One hardly denies that *Kala Malam* saliently conforms to the conventions of (Hollywood) classic film noir, particularly in terms of its structural and narrational devices. The narrative of *Kala Malam* is characterized as complex (especially in the context of Malaysian cinema); it also entails the use of flashback, and the first-person (the protagonist, Saleh Mat Piah – played by Rosyam Nor) voice-over narration as a structuring device, as well as other techniques that seem to thwart and obscure the narrative sequence. The protagonist Saleh is an investigative journalist who through his inner thoughts drives the narrative throughout. In many ways, the film employs 'restricted' narration as its filmic mode of narration as the spectator relies on Saleh as a source of knowledge (as we can follow the story construction *via* Saleh as the narrative's mediating agent). Here, the voice-over works as the dominant structuring device in terms of mode of narration. It pre-empts certain character relationships, keeps us informed – or misinformed – on Saleh's actions/reactions, and gives the text a particular audio-visual rhythm.

*Kala Malam* is indeed imbued with elements of pessimism and anxiety<sup>4</sup> (elements which putatively characterize Hollywood noirs) which provide an unflattering picture of pre-independent Malaya (as the story is set in 1956 Malaya). Saleh – the hero – is rather flawed and morally ambivalent than the norm, as he eventually falls in love with the beautiful Cik Putih who turns out to be a *jembalang* (ghost). Throughout, Saleh is depicted as a lonely and 'alienated' hero, 'filled with existential bitterness.' He is a journalist who has just been fired and, stranded in the small town of Senduduk Rimbun after one of his tyres is punctured by a kris (Malay dagger), has to negotiate mysterious events, tough guys, *femmes fatales*, and ever-present danger in order to get to the truth. In other words, Saleh is a typical noir hero, for he is trapped in unwanted situations, striving against random, uncaring fate, and frequently doomed. During his short stay in Senduduk Rimbun – a small town which I would consider as a mini 'dystopia' replete with inherent corrupt, lust and paranoia – Saleh learns that when there is a full moon, a man disappears from the village. The rumour circulating the town is that a *jembalang* (ghost/

vampire) is responsible for the disappearing men. Whilst classic film noir has been associated with the American social landscape of the era – in particular, with a sense of heightened anxiety and alienation that is said to have followed World War II, *Kala Malam* is set in 1956 Malaya (a year before independence). The film's narrative is imbricate with a multitude of incidents and characters: an underground plot of the Communist party, a Sikh secret-agent working for the British government, a man-tiger and a *jembalang*, all of which contributes to the reflection of social and cultural paranoia.

Rather than focusing on simple 'black-and-white' decisions, *Kala Malam* poses moral quandaries that are unusually ambiguous and relative. Indeed, the film focuses on "mentally, emotionally and physically vulnerable characters," through its thematic preoccupations concerning "anxiety and uncompromised morality." A character like Saleh who pursues goals based on clear-cut moral standards – by going against the grain to discover the truth – seems to be more than willing to let the "ends justify the means." As a hero of 'noir,' Saleh the investigator who is in search of truth places other people in 'mortal' danger in order to achieve his goal. Besides, he also places himself in mortal danger and is in the horns of dilemma when he has to come to terms with a crucial decision upon discovering that the woman he is in love with is in fact a ghost. The opening scene of the film which is captured in 'Dutch-tilt' shot (oblique angle) while the protagonist narrates that he has to make crucial decisions in life prefigures this, as rendering a sense of irresolution and visual anxiety to the spectator. In a way, Saleh Mat Piah is a hero who seems to oppose pre-existing values and standards (by going against his employer resulting in him being terminated; by marrying Cik Putih who is a ghost) but, instead, is encumbered with heavy responsibilities for his existence. Should Saleh deny his love and refuse to marry Cik Putih, he would evade his acknowledgment of freedom and succumb to a condition to which human consciousness is particularly prone. His decision to marry Cik Putih could be seen as his *carte blanche*, for he is free to give his existence its own meaning and values. Perhaps the existentialist sense of meaningless life, as experienced by Saleh, is undoubtedly intensified by the depressive social milieu from which he emerges. But, Saleh is a more complex character than he appears to be. Saleh seems to refuse to fall into unthinking conformity with conventional values and the expectations around him, thereby leading him to strike out his own path; his intransigence in upholding certain principles and values when it

comes to work leads him to lose his job, as well as his fastidiousness in looking for his soul mate complicates his romantic pursuits.<sup>5</sup>

One also notices the use of film noir techniques, as stylistic influence, at work in *Kala Malam*. This genre has been noted for its 'darker' visual style and for its particular construction of character-types. A play on light and dark, seen and not seen, the use of shadows and silhouetted figures mark it as generally distinctive. According to Bordwell and Thompson (1986), American film noirs of the 1940s used underexposed images to increase pervasive darkness. Take a look at several scenes that take place in the dark lounge in which many characters (including Doreen Chua, her assistant, Mahinder Singh, Miss Rogayah, Cik Puteh) are confronting each other and attempting at unraveling their underlying motives: the lighting is intense that each possible shadow is pronounced. Every character's face is partially obscured by darkness, thereby eliciting sense of mystery and ambiguity (for example, we can discern the details of the lighting when characters Doreen Chua and Mahinder Singh are captured in close-up and medium close-up respectively). Indeed, in *Kala Malam*, the whole sense of ambiguities is indeed manifest in the visual style – a very much reminiscent of classic film noir – with its deployment of low-key lighting schemes that generate light/dark contrast and dramatic shadow patterning. Here, the high contrast lighting seems dramatic, richly-textured and aggressively theatrical, infusing characters and objects with a sense of visual tension. Furthermore, such style is profuse in images of cigarette smoke swirling in the dimly lit lounge. There is a high-angle shot which captures these characters pointing their gun at each other reinforces sense of alienation and confinement: each character is imprisoned in his or her own space cubicle, as they look buried alive. More importantly, Mamat's mise-en-scene (with all the compositional elements in the shot) further amplifies the sense of entrapment, as prefigured by their confrontation earlier. All this contributes to the 'noirish' tone which implies fatalism and paranoia with which the film's theme(s) and narrative are concerned; as in the film, the scene (and many other scenes throughout) are suffused with pessimism, as mentioned earlier, emphasizing the darker aspect of human condition. The effective use of lighting in this film plays intertextually on the convention of this genre to emphasize 'noir' as a world of night and shadows.

## Parodying the 'Noir'

As is known, film parody has long been associated with the recitation and violation of rules: rules of character, rules of setting and rules of narrative – in essence, the rules of genre (Harries, 2002). In other words, film parody is a specific type of comedy – a humorous take-off of a more serious film or genre, ridiculing or poking fun at the style conventions, formulas, or motifs of a serious work. According to Wes D. Gehring (1999), parody is the least appreciated of all film comedy genres and receives little serious attention, even among film fans. Traditional film genres have long been a favoured target of film parody, from Mark Sennett's 1916 Western spoof, *His Bitter Pill* (featuring a cross-eyed Ben Turpin spoofing cowboy star, William S. Hart), to the Wayans brothers' sequel to a parody of a parody, *Scary Movie 2* (2001). Film parody functions by taking pre-established and fairly stable semiotic structures (such as a genre, or the work of a particular director, or even a widely viewed single film) and recontextualizing the structure through the oscillation between similarity to and difference from the targeted texts. Any given film genre and subgenre (such as the Western or the 'teen slasher' horror film), therefore, provides a parody with a fairly stable model to both evoke and recontextualize. As a matter of fact, one may argue that parody films not only serve as humorous critiques of genre, but also, indeed, are *about* genre as they provide a meta-commentary on the genre while reiterating its rules and conventions.

This section aims to examine the extent to which *Kala Malam* can be considered as film parody. According to Geoff King (2002), the target of parody tends to be formal and/or aesthetic. Familiar conventions, representational devices or modes of discourse are the subject of humorous assault or exposure. Parody conducts its meta-commentary on genre through a process of recontextualization that operates on the simultaneous creation of similarity and difference from the targeted text. As expected, similar elements that reappear in the parody (as discussed earlier) sanction the genre by restating recognizable codes and conventions. Yet any deviation from the target also inevitably ends up reaffirming that model with an unavoidable acknowledgment of the structure that parody is critiquing. When *Kala Malam* adds horror scenes inspired by those *Pontianak* films and other horrors produced by the Cathay Keris into its 'investigative' narrative, it not only pokes fun at the extraneous inclusion of a scene that does not belong to the overall targeted



genre (the film noir), but also demonstrates and reaffirms the boundaries of that genre by including an element that does not reside within those boundaries. In other words, by evoking a genre to be spoofed, film parody not only uses the genre's structure to create difference through processes of exaggeration, extraneous inclusion, literalization, inversion and misdirection, but also reiterates and reaffirms the conventions that constitute the genre's structure through these processes.<sup>6</sup> As Thomas Schatz (1981) notes, "we are most aware of a generic 'contact' when it is violated" (cited in Harries, 2002, p. 283). However, this activity of violation creates more than an 'awareness' of the codes, as it reaffirms and sustains the contract itself (Harries, 2002).

*Kala Malam* employs 'extraneous inclusion,' that is, a strategy that works by inserting 'foreign' lexical units into a conventionalized syntax or through the inclusion of narrative scenes that fall outside of the target text's general conventions. For instance, *Kala Malam* operates primarily through an extended parody of Hollywood noirs, with references to some other Malay film genres thrown in for good measure. Towards the end of the film, two iconic characters of old Malay horrors, *Si Tora Harimau Jadian* (Tiger Man) and *Pontianak* (Female Vampire) appear; in a reverse manner, such elements and characters are considered 'foreign' lexicons within the course of Hollywood film noirs. One would notice that several film noirs made in the 1940s and 1950s (such as *Cat People*) are indeed horror films dealing with the 'monster.' But, I would argue that these iconographies, which are concerned with beliefs in the supernatural and spiritual, have been associated with 'us,' for they are based on Malay mythology and legends.<sup>7</sup> Another 'extraneous inclusion' entails musical numbers which totally defy the codes and conventions of noir; this is in concomitant with the film's effort as serving as homage to the old Malay films (as one of the principle hallmarks of Malay films of this era is the inclusion of ubiquitous musical numbers regardless of genres). On the one hand, the inclusion of musical numbers serves purposes in terms of narrative causality. On the other, the musical numbers (as appeared in old Malay films) serve as a break for the viewer, a moment at which tension is released, after which tension is once more increased. As is the case with the old Malay films, this seems to be the result of the direct influence of *bangsawan* theatre, which included this type of musical number not just to release tension, but also to lengthen the performance and give the stage crew *time* to change the set (Timothy White, 1996; Chan Chih Min, 1993). Inasmuch as this is the case, as a parody, *Kala Malam* mocks its targets, but in doing so, it pays an effective

form of tribute to the originals (Hollywood noirs and a variety of Malay film genres of 1950s and 1960s).

'Inversion' is one way parody that can move away from the conventions or more specific details of their target objects, "a parodic method to modify either the lexicon, syntax and style by way of creating a signifier which ironically suggests an opposite meaning from its employment in the target text" (Harries, 2000). In *Kala Malam*, the scene that takes place in the hotel in which Saleh and the nightclub chanteuse, Miss Rogayah are having an intimate conversation may illustrate the notion of 'inversion.' Saleh seems apprehensive at the prospect of succumbing to the alluring and dangerous Miss Rogayah since Miss Rogayah – one of the *femmes fatales* – supposedly represents 'the temptations and dangers of sexual transgression' with which *femme fatale* is normally associated in any film noir. After a short while, when being lulled by Miss Rogayah's sexual and romantic overtures, he suddenly discovers Miss Rogayah's parents' appearance, as they have been hiding in the hotel room, serving as 'moral watchdogs.' Such modification ironically suggests an opposite meaning from its employment in the target text because in the classic film noir, *femmes fatales* are normally 'independent,' and are thus never accompanied or escorted by their parents or family members.<sup>8</sup>

During the last act of the film, after Saleh following the mysterious Professor, Dr. Rushdi (played by Kuswadinata) discovers some truths about the kris and the disappearing men, the film veers towards a ghost love story imbued with melodramatic sentimentality. In the course of film parody, this can be seen as 'misdirection' – an effect that occurs "when specific elements are evoked, and initially played out in a manner similar to the target text, but then is transformed to deliver an unexpected turn in the eventual parodic presentation" (Harries, 2000, p. 38). Critic S. B. Toh (2008) overlooks this point by noting that "after a while, the plot meanders, the movie plods, and slowly but surely the novelty wears off, especially in the third act when satire abruptly gives way to heavy melodrama." In this sense, towards the end, the viewer is prepared to ascertain some truths about the kris and the disappearing men that occur every full moon. Nonetheless, the narrative is "transformed to deliver an unexpected turn." Another example of 'misdirection' involves the scene in which Saleh who supposedly yields (either sexually and/or emotionally) to any of the *femmes fatales*' temptation ends up being ravished by an overweight masseuse (non-*femme fatale*) in his hotel room, instead. In the subsequent scene, Saleh, via his voice-over narration, regrets losing

his 'virginity' that has been 'preserved' for about twenty seven years; as he reveals later that the incident has been 'haunting' him.

'Literalization' is another frequently-exploited source of parodic humour. It is a technique that takes a naïve approach to the source text, as though it is readable only literally and not through the lens of convention (Harries, 2000). For instance, take the scene in which Saleh asks for directions and is told to look for the yellow house at the end of the road. Saleh laments that in this 'black-and-white' era, how is one to recognize 'yellow'? This is such a joke that parodies a conventional film technique and is targeted at spoofing most of the classic film noirs which were mostly made in black-and-white.

Another attribute that can be found is 'exaggeration' – generally is one of the easiest and most obvious parodic strategies, demonstrating the arbitrariness of familiar conventions through their extension to the point of absurdity. In other words, 'exaggeration' takes an aspect of the source text and renders it absurd by means of excessive emphasis. This technique is applicable to simple objects, narrative or stylistic conventions. For example, when Saleh is offered a lift by a lorry driver, the mobility of the lorry is an artifice, as entailing a sense of exaggeration and to a certain extent, a sense of ludicrousness. Saleh also, via his voice-over narration, is commenting upon the driver's reluctance to focus on his driving as he keeps turning around to talk to him. Such a scene offers an underlying critique of the antiquated production techniques in old films which are made in the studio. For example, the lorry is not realistically moving on the road; its mobility is rather mocked before the camera. Another aspect which is critiqued in the scene entails the actors' 'exaggerated' performances as mentioned above. Indeed, many stylistic elements (including performances) in old films (in the studio era) defied notions of realism and verisimilitude, as indicated in the scene with Saleh in a lorry. In this respect, 'exaggeration' can also be discerned by means of the actors' performances. Rosyam's acting is clearly one of the principle attributes that harks back to the old Malay films when such style of acting was thought to be extremely realistic. But one must bear in mind that conceptions of 'realistic' acting have changed over film history, thus one has to evaluate the actor's performance when he/she looks and behaves in a manner *appropriate* to his/her character's *function* in the context of the film (David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson, 1986). Rosyam's acting as Saleh Mat Piah, a confused and 'hardboiled' investigator, by today's standard, can be considered stylized – replicative

of the performances in the Malay films (of the 1950s and 1960s) which were heavily influenced by the *bangsawan* and *sandiwara* (as a comedy [parody], *Kala Malam* does provide motivation for greater stylization and exaggeration in almost all aspects). A self-mocking style is established that gives him the status of a sort of anti-hero. Rosyam's performance entails visual and verbal gags; for example, Saleh's ridiculous running gigs in one of the scenes are exaggerated to ludicrously performative extremes, thereby contributing to the film's overall comic quality and form.

*Kala Malam* also makes fun of the noir conventions in terms visual expression, that is, the low-key black-and-white lighting which was very much influenced by German Expressionist silent films of the late 1910s and the 1920s. The low-key noir style opposes light and dark, casting rich, black shadows. The scene in which Saleh is about to be ravished by the overweight masseuse in the hotel room concerns elements of 'exaggeration' giving rise to the scene's comic frisson. In terms of lighting, the 'noirish' silhouetted image of Saleh being carried, upraised and turned around several times by the masseuse (before he is thrown onto the bed) appears caricatural, with the whole body figure looking 'prosthetic.' Such a disfigurement of Saleh's silhouetted image plays to the extreme carnivalesque and grotesque effect. Thus, in the context of the putative provenance of noir's visual style, the intended effect as to cast sharp shadows and darkness in conveying connotations of the mysterious and the unknown extends the scene (film) to the point of ludicrousness and absurdity.

## **As a Satire: Comedy with an Edge**

*Kala Malam* in many ways serves as a satire as well, for the film treads an uneasy line between comedy and more obviously 'serious' and contentious material.<sup>9</sup> According to Geoff King (2002), satire is a comedy with an edge and a target, usually social or political in some way. The terms 'satire' and 'parody' are often used rather loosely and imprecisely, as if interchangeable. This can be a source of confusion. The two are not always entirely separate, however; they can overlap to a significant extent. As I shall demonstrate, as in *Kala Malam*, satire is also achieved through parody – the social and political satire of which is mounted through parody of Hollywood noir and Malay film genres of the 1950s and 1960s. In other words, parody, aimed at formal and aesthetic conventions, can

have satirical impact. As I would argue later, *Kala Malam* as a parody can also be seen as a form of attack, debunking and undermining familiar conventions in a manner that has potential social and political implications. King (2002) asserts that satire is a form of comedy that also widens the scope for social/political criticism in the relatively mainstream film products of more 'liberal' societies such as the United States. *Kala Malam* voices this kind of material through a form of comedy – mobilized to satirical/critical effect in several scenes in a subtle manner. It shades at one end into broader and generally 'safer' comic forms. In Malaysian context, however, as exemplified by *Kala Malam*, comedy of a satirical variety might be the *only* way in which internal social or political criticism can reach an audience.

One of the issues accentuated by *Kala Malam* in a satirical manner pertains to language as a component of culture within the context of Malaysia's multiculturalism. The story is set in 1956 Malaya – a year before independence – but lends itself to a reading in terms of contemporary Malaysia. The film has some real satirical bite, making connections between its comic-fictional antics and real historical epochs; indeed, the years from 1941 to 1957 proved to be rather turbulent politically (Khoo Kay Kim, 2008). For example, the film evokes a contentious issue of language in the wider context of cultural assimilation and pluralism. The scene in which the underground Communist leader delivers a speech and urges that German language be used to unite or integrate the multi-racial society in the country when they come into power, may cynically hint at the contentious issue of language in Malaysia (which seems contemporary), particularly in regard to the peripheral status of the Malay language (as a national language). The leader further asserts that languages of the Malay, Chinese and Indian will not be used; only German can unite the society of diverse cultures and background, instead. The scene attempts to mock or ridicule some sections of the society – be it the authorities, politicians, organizations or individuals in Malaysia that continuously insist on the use of English as a language that can unite our multi-racial society. The scene is endowed with a satirical undertone for it manages to critique Malaysians' fascination with the English language at the expense of marginalizing the national language which is supposed to be the vehicle to unite us as one people of many races. As a comedy/satire, the use of 'German' instead of 'English' is to insulate from the serious and 'contentious' material.<sup>10</sup> Any serious implications are substantially reduced by the assurance that, as comedy, a film is ultimately 'just kidding,' even if it does contain a more dramatic

undertow, as identified by Raymond Durgnat (1969). When the leader of the Communist Party is arrested, the film eventually reveals that he is indeed a local (and a Malay) when he speaks in a heavily-accented Kedah dialects. This further mocks our people/society who normally takes pride in elevating and valorizing the use of a foreign language. This being the case, such mockery is one of the great attractions of comedy as a whole: its ability to tread in potentially sensitive areas without the risk that might be associated with a straight or more serious treatment.

To further amplify the film's satirical mode, Mamat Khalid ridicules and mocks other groups in society especially along racial/ethnic lines, a tendency that can be considered widespread in human cultures; however, the considerations of racial and ethnic mockery in *Kala Malam* (as a potential source of satiric comedy) do not, I believe, appear pernicious, although they are obliquely deployed to reinforce inequalities. Since the story is set in 1956, Senduduk Rimbun the mysterious small town reflects the ramifications of colonial urban planning which contributes to the racial polarization and ethnic divisions in the country. The film reconfigures a character – a Sikh secret agent, Mahinder Singh, working for the British government who speaks accented Malay but never fails to ostensibly interpolate Malay idioms and proverbs in his sentences whenever he speaks (In fact, the character clearly resembles a broadcasting celebrity who is of Sikh descent well-known for his fondness for Malay clichés and proverbs). In one of the scenes, he is lambasted by the sassy nightclub owner, Doreen Chua (played by Corrinne Adrienne) due to his *inappropriate* use of those proverbs. Mahinder's undivided commitment with the language is further shown in the scene that first establishes him where he is reading a Malay-language newspaper, *Warta Selat*. This certainly serves as a counterpoint to those (particularly the underground Communist) who are inclined to undermine the position of the Malay language which should be developed as a *lingua franca*; whilst at the same time offering a subtle criticism towards those who seemingly refuse to elevate the Malay language to a more respectable level.<sup>11</sup>

In several scenes, as we witness Doreen Chua conversing with Saleh and another hotel staff (who is also Chinese), their conversation alternates between Malay and Mandarin, as she interjects Mandarin between Malay. This pokes fun at certain sections of our polyglot society (especially the 'ethnic other') who are inclined and find it more convenient to speak in their mother tongue even before those of other race/ethnicity. The character of the hotel's staff (played by David Teoh who seems to be playing himself) is depicted as 'ethnic other' replete with language incompetency as he

frequently mispronounces words and utters lines such as: “*Mau ‘massass’ ka?*” (trans. “would you like massage?”). Thus, the character appears as an ‘ethnic other’ buffoon and the object of amusement; this has become a device of local comedy (in film and television) as to mock the ‘ethnic other’ with the use of puns with regards to their incompetency of the national language. I would argue that the appearance of ‘ethnic other’ characters does not function solely as figures of the containment of racial/ethnic hegemony, marginalizing the ‘ethnic other’ identity through derision. In fact, such representations can be said to ‘disavow’ the mainstream’s desire to ridicule ‘ethnic other’ (if that is the case). I would further argue instead that comic structures provide a suitably ambivalent space to portray an uncondemned ‘ethnic other.’ It is precisely this ambivalence of comedy which opens a space in ideology where the ‘ethnic other’ (and other dissident groups) can get in. As Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik (1990) argue, “All instances of the comic ... are founded on the transgression of decorum and verisimilitude: on deviations from any social or aesthetic rule, norm, model, convention or law” (p. 86). As Neale and Krutnik further assert that the comic can result in ‘bad taste’ and “the transgression of more social taboos” (p. 88).

As a film, what seems unique about Mamat’s satirical strategy in *Kala Malam* is its potentiality to be cynical even in terms of its visual presentation. For example, the film fully utilizes the kris (Malay dagger) and full moon as two recurring, significant images throughout. The kris is such a significant prop or aspect of mise-en-scene; here, let me offer a reading of the kris as an iconography which is identifiable with the old Malay films, in particular the *purbawara* film genre. It is useful to turn now to semiological reading of the kris as a sign that produces meaning in relation to their referential reality; this concept, as termed by Saussure, is *signification*. Within what has been termed as the semiological system, Barthes (1972) identifies two orders of signification, *denotation* and *connotation*, which in turn produce a third – ideology. In the course of *Kala Malam*, the kris, at the denotative level, is a prop that significantly drives the film’s narrative. The protagonist Saleh Mat Piah stumbles across the kris when one of the tyres of his car is punctured. Saleh continues to unravel the mystery until we are brought to the past (by means of a flashback) to observe that a shaman is about to burn a woman to death in order to obtain a magical kris from her.

At a connotative level, we associate this kris (in the context of Malay/*Nusantara* world) with the rich and powerful, as the kris can

signify and is believed to possess spiritual and supernatural power and nobility, as well as an object of adoration and reverence.<sup>12</sup> As we can observe during the flashback, the kris has some magical/spiritual power which leads the shaman to burn the woman who possesses it to death. As mythmakers (at a mythic level) – if seen in the context of a satire – we understand this sign as activating the myth of Malay/sian politics.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, there is no doubt that today the kris is seen by some as a symbol of exclusive Malay power and identity. Set in the context of Malaysia where racialized politics has become normalized, the kris is now made to stand at the cultural frontier that separates the Malays from other ‘races.’ According to Farish A. Noor (2006), the kris has become a symbol of ethno-nationalist exclusivism, a totem of aggressive masculinity and an emblem of a racialized communitarianism. As a satire, I would suggest that the film, in many ways, attempts indirectly at poking fun at a *cause celebre* – a controversial political occasion (a few years back) when a politician kissed and brandished the kris (whose party’s logo is infused with a couple of kris emblazoned on it).<sup>14</sup> This can be referred to the earlier scene in which the tyre of Saleh’s car is punctured, the kris (discovered by Saleh) is seen brandished by a corpse; in this case, the reading of the kris may evoke political implication where the director mocks or makes a sardonic statement about the aforementioned politician or political party. In the course of the film’s narrative, the kris is the most overdetermined symbolic fetish of the people in Senduduk Rimbun, as Saleh himself seems curious as to why many people he encounters intend to have it.

The title of the film directly refers to the night which conjures images of the full moon, making it the second recurring image (motif) in *Kala Malam* which takes on many meanings. At the simple first order of meaning in the course of the film’s narrative, the ‘full moon’ serves as a reductive signifier, representing time; the full moon night is when men in Senduduk Rimbun disappear. Whenever the montage appears, we are alerted to the fact that something sinister is happening; this corresponds with the flashback in which the middle-aged woman puts a curse on the people of Senduduk Rimbun whenever the full moon rises, men will be disappearing. At the second level (as connotative agents), the full moon is not only a luminous, passive watcher in the night sky, but a powerful force, implying romanticism, in terms of love and lust, as well as fertility; this can be significantly seen in the hero’s (Saleh) romantic encounters. Carl Jung (Gerald Massey, 1990) sees it as a potent alchemical symbol – the time when the female principle and the male principle are completely



conjunct. Saleh who has been harbouring hopes to marry Cik Putih eventually does so, although he has been facing a lot of difficulties in the process. Saleh also seems to achieve a sense of equilibrium when he manages to 'reclaim' his masculinity which has been diluted by marrying her. Other associative meanings that can be dovetailed with the moon concern gender and libido symbols. As Massey notes that while full moon is equated with metamorphosis, in the repertory of ancient writings, it has represented renewal, transformation and maternal qualities. Indeed, as in many cultures and traditions, the moon serves as a feminine symbol. Because its visible cycles mirror the life of woman, the ancients believed that the moon was the representative of the Triple Goddess (Alexandra Genetti, 1997). In the course of *Kala Malam*, the protagonist Saleh is attempting to fulfill and reclaim his 'lost' masculine libido (this is the point to which I shall return in due course once I read another recurring image i.e. the kris as a phallic, masculine symbol).

At a mythic level, the sign is activating the myth of Malaysian culture and politics. As we learn from the flashback, the full moon serves as a very negative sign of connoting destruction and something sinister. In the Malay myth and folklore, it is believed that when the full moon rises, the *jembalang* as well as the tiger man are persons who shapeshift into monstrous creatures after being placed under a curse (as previously dramatized in old Malay horrors). Here, *Kala Malam* cynically remarks on the Malays in particular who are traditionally and deeply entrenched in superstitions; this is remarked and questioned by one of the characters, the history professor, Dr. Rushdi in regard to our society's ingrained beliefs in superstition (or supernatural powers). On the other hand, the film also offers an underlying critique towards the powers that be that play out issues such as superstition so that the reality is insulated. Loosely, the moon myth is also activated here – as is the kris – in a playful, sardonic manner, ascribing it with political connotation; indeed, the full moon is emblematic of and has been associated with a religious-communitarian political party in Malaysia (the full moon is indeed inscribed in the party's logo).<sup>15</sup>

In *Kala Malam*, one also sees a sardonic/satiric play on the politics of gender and sexuality; this can be fathomed by means of the signification of the kris, as interpreted before. Here, the kris renders a phallic status, a symbol of masculine power and pride; its association with the phallus is even mocked as puns in several scenes when the characters are trying to figure out the length of the kris. Through the flashback, we learn that the owner of the kris is a woman. A shaman (who is a male) is in dire

need to obtain it from her (perhaps in order to reclaim his [masculine] power). He goes on to burn her to death; one of his lines uttered sounds rather 'misogynist' – "*Bakar orang betina ni!*" (lit. translated: "Burn this 'woman' [bitch] to death!"). In terms of the construction of gender, I would like to bring attention to Farish A. Noor's (2006) essay in which he states that one of the esoteric aspects of krislore was its intimate link to the philosophy and praxis of Tantrism – an ancient pre-vedantic system of belief and cosmology that pre-dated the vedantic-Aryan teachings that would later develop and be known as Hinduism. In addition, Tantrism was highly regarded for its view of woman as the centre of creation.<sup>16</sup> As Farish further asserts:

A trantic reading of this ... the masculine power of the kris blade is being enveloped and thus contained within the sacred feminine space of the sheath; thereby bringing about equilibrium and order, when the feminine encapsulates, embodies and contains the masculine. Ultimately, therefore, harmony in the universe is achieved when the expansive (and potentially destructive) power of the masculine is domesticated and tamed by the feminine. (p. 8)

This explication can be further read in the context of the film's pathologization of Saleh Mat Piah, the protagonist – who is a 'weak' hero, contesting the 'tough' and 'hardboiled' ideals of masculinity (a kind of typical 'noir' hero). The act of Saleh carrying the kris with him throughout and searching for the 'mystery' behind it implies Saleh's state of 'disequilibrium' in terms of being deprived of 'hard-boiled' ideals of masculinity; this is because the kris (even upon discovering it) is without its sheath. Saleh has indeed to confront three *femmes fatales* (in the context of film 'noir,' they are 'masculine construct') as to encapsulate, embody and domesticate him. In addition, he laments over the fact that his jealously kept virginity was lost by one of the masseuses operating at the sleazy hotel. When he is about being ravished by the overweight masseuse – a disruptive and comically 'unruly' woman, Saleh expresses a more effeminate demeanour (look at his rather 'feminine' gestures and mannerisms).

Saleh's 'troubled' masculinity is further suggested in the scene in which Saleh is having an intimate conversation with the nightclub chanteuse Miss Rogayah. In the scene, Saleh attempts to resist the temptations of desire, as he seems to be offered and aroused (sexually) by Miss Rogayah – the coquettish *femme fatale*. While he is about becoming intimate with her, whilst caressing her, their romantic

rendezvous is abruptly marred by the sudden presence of Miss Rogayah's parents as inevitable 'watchdogs.' I would argue that had Salleh married Miss Rogayah, he would have further 'emasculated' his sense of masculinity because, as future parents-in-law, Miss Rogayah's parents who appear domineering would have been a great encumbrance to him. On the one hand, the configuration of his character parallels that of the typical hero of classic film noirs – a hero who normally aspires, sometimes successfully, often unsuccessfully, to 'tough' or 'hardboiled' ideals of masculinity. In alignment to this, many scholars and critics see 'noir' as dramatizing "a particular crisis in male identity," often emphasizing the extent to which noir's female characters can be viewed as a function of male dilemmas and male anxieties. On the other, as a ludic 'subversion of norms,' comedy/parody/satire can critique and even deconstruct dominant ideology; Andrew S. Horton (1991) argues that it can be positioned "outside, around, and in opposition to the implied and stated norms of patriarchal society" (p. 16). Thus, Saleh's attempt at keeping or preserving the kris symbolizes his attempt at reclaiming or reasserting his masculinity; this safeguards the immutability of gender division because the fact that 'the stress is on grotesquerie, not attractiveness' proves that men cannot be women, and vice versa.

Through visual motifs, Mamat Khalid seems to ridicule and poke fun at our social and political scenarios and issues. By setting the story in 1956 Malaya – a world of lust, corruption and incompetence is implied, as the specific events taking on broader symbolic or allegorical resonances. In the case of *Kala Malam*, satire is not really the primary mode of the film but just one component among others. Some are gentle, and some are harsh and biting, assuming a particular moral or political standpoint. It is tempting to note that the character Saleh, in one of the scenes, proclaims sardonically and humorously: *Cemerlang. Gemilang. Terbilang.* (lit. Excellence. Glory. Distinction.); this is Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's slogan on coming to office in 2003. In Northrop Frye's (1957) definition of satire: "its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured" (p. 233). In *Kala Malam*, however, we can discern that the attitude of the author (Mamat Khalid) is left uncertain. This being the case, I would argue that as a comedy, *Kala Malam* does not assume the safe transmission of an ideological message, even when it is explicitly articulated; as Horton (1991) puts it: "a political viewpoint is always

ambiguous or double-edged. What seems a radical leftist comedy to one generation may seem conservative and double-edged to another” (p. 16). Jerry Palmer’s structural analysis of comedy in *The Logic of the Absurd* (1987) underlines the ‘double’ possibility of the comic as conservative or subversive or even both at once, depending on the audience and content” (p. 4). In short, comedy, as an open and ambivalent structure, allows readers to swing both ways. Interestingly, as a Malaysian film satire, *Kala Malam* can be seen as products of a period in which Malaysian faith in politics and politicians reached a lower than average ebb, as evident after the 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election which was held on March 8, 2008.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it can be stressed that Mamat Khalid’s *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*, though conforming to the codes and conventions of Hollywood noirs of the 1940s and 1950s, is far from being a ‘pale imitator’ of American cultural forms. This is further sanctioned by the fact that the film, saturated with local sensibilities, also serves as homage to old Malay cinema. As I have discussed, as a parody, *Kala Malam* both reaffirms and deconstructs the codes and conventions of the targeted genre it is spoofing (that is, film ‘noir’), as well as other old Malay film genres, running the gamut from horror to melodrama. This being the case, the film is rich with intertextual references across cultures. The film also has a satirical impact, as it manages to tackle serious social-political material by poking fun at contemporary Malaysian issues without slipping into over-insistent or ‘preachy’ realms of melodrama or straight propaganda. What seems unique about *Kala Malam* is that it is constructed across – and works over – specific generic boundary divisions. As Steve Neale (2000) posits, and as Mamat’s film demonstrates quite effectively, genre is “difference *in* repetition” (p. 221). Neale argues that a genre text is not static, that it takes the normative codes of a genre and “re-works them, extends them, or transform them altogether” (p. 225). This is precisely the type of work attempted by Mamat Khalid in *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* – noir parody with a satirical edge.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The film has spawned a host of reactions and debates especially after winning some major awards (including Best Film and Best Director) at the 21<sup>st</sup> Malaysian Film Festival in August, 2008. To my understanding, *Kala Malam* has been discoursed in a series of talks since it was released in January 2008. This includes *Apresiasi Filem* program organized by FINAS in January; a talk with the director Mamat Khalid on the film organized by ASWARA in August 2008; a talk on Mamat Khalid's works, *Seminar Menjejak Pemikiran Mamat Khalid*, organized by FINAS and UiTM held in September 2008; and the *Apresiasi Filem Antarabangsa 2008* (in conjunction with Kuala Lumpur International Film Festival), organized by FINAS, FDAM and Universiti Malaya held in November 2008. The film did not do that well commercially as it only collected RM554,000 (Source: <http://www.finas.gov.my/>).
- <sup>2</sup> Indeed, Mamat himself labels his work as 'neo-noir,' as reported by the press. In a way, the film has engendered a progressive film culture in Malaysia as it paths the way for further discourses and responses by local moviegoers in regard to its generic label and approach (noir, neo-noir, parody/spoof, satire, etc) employed by the director.
- <sup>3</sup> Paolo Bertolin's mention of 'a thin – and openly preposterous – premise of film noir' has a kernel of truth about the film's generic frame. My essay attempts at further proving that *Kala Malam* is neither 'film noir' (in the canonical sense) nor 'neo-noir' as promulgated by the director, though it can be argued that the term 'neo-noir' is rather fluid and flexible that it can be adopted to a wide range of films. Even the term 'film noir' has been dismissed by many scholars and critics as a *legitimate* genre due to the fact that what has been termed as 'film noir' comprises a myriad of film genres; this includes crime thriller, melodrama, war film, and gangster, among others. This, from the blurb on the back of Bruce Crowther's book, *Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror* (1988), is as good a summary as any of what 'film noir' is generally taken to be – and as good an example as any of some of the problems associated with 'noir,' especially in so far as these problems centre on issues of genre:

With the advent of the Second World War a new mood was discernible in film drama – an atmosphere of disillusion and a sense of foreboding, a dark quality that derived as much from the characters depicted as from the cinematographer’s art. These films, among them such classics as *Double Indemnity*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Touch of Evil* and *Sunset Boulevard*, emerged retrospectively as genre in themselves when a French film critic referred to them collectively as ‘film noir.’

- 4 Elements of pessimism and anxiety which signify ‘film noir’ do appear throughout the film; this can be seen not only in the context of its visual and aural expression, but in the context of its narrative form and structure as well as mentioned, for the film employs ‘restricted narration’ as its filmic mode of narration. This is because the film (as well as the camera), throughout, focuses upon the protagonist Saleh Mat Piah, thus eschewing other characters’ point-of-view. By this, the narrative information is mainly conveyed through Saleh (or at least in scenes that entail Saleh) and this causes both viewers as well as the character Saleh sharing limited access to the narrative information. Here, *Kala Malam* disturbs the ‘objectivity’ of the film, as the narrative tends to foreground the subjectivity and ‘interiority’ of noir’s principal characters.
- 5 Though at this stage I read the character Saleh as a typical, problematic ‘noir’ hero that drives the entire narrative, I am not suggesting here that the film thematizes some underlying questions concerning ‘existentialism.’ Since *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* reiterates the narrative trajectory of any canonical film noirs, it seems difficult not to overlook this fact because many film noirs explicitly and self-consciously invoke existential questions, or are imbued with existential themes.
- 6 In this essay, the parodic strategy discussed is drawn from Dan Harries’ delineation of six key parodic strategies in his work *Film Parody*: reiteration, inversion, misdirection, literalization, extraneous inclusion, exaggeration. Within such a structure, Harries embarks on a systematic, well-illustrated account of how each method operates across the three textual planes of lexicon, syntax and style. Harries’ whole work entails the construction of a taxonomy of the textual strategies employed by film parodies with respect to their target

texts, genres and modes (or as Harries would have it, their target 'logonomic systems'). For further, detailed discussion, see Harries, *Film Parody* (London: BFI, 2000).

- 7 Timothy White, in his article, "Pontianak, P. Ramlee and Islam: The Cinema of Malaysia" (1997), writes: "It is important to remember that although they are devout Muslims, Malays also tend to be somewhat superstitious (despite official efforts, in Malaysia at least, to discredit these beliefs). These beliefs in the supernatural, the spiritual, and animism – including, for example, the pontianak (a type of vampire who becomes a beautiful woman when a nail is inserted into the back of its neck); the polong (an unfortunate zombie-like creature whose intestines trail behind his severed torso); and the wise, talking mouse deer – are not uncommon today, but were even more prominent during the earlier era of filmmaking."
- 8 According to many commentators, *femmes fatales* are openly sexual – and often powerful, independent and treacherous – female characters, and that in general the principal female characters in 'noir' tend to divide neatly into two basic types: alluring – and dangerous – *femme fatales* on the one hand, and dependable, respectable, safe and undemanding partners, wives and girlfriends on the other. For further discussion, see Kaplan, E. A. (1978), *Women in Film Noir*, London: British Film Institute.
- 9 According to Steve Neale (2000), satire – the debunking of prevalent social norms, institutions and mores – is clearly central to any theory or discussion of comedy's socio-cultural role and significance. Neale adds that comedy has often been viewed as either actually or potentially subversive, or at least an inherently positive force for social renewal and social change. This view has long been influential in literary studies of comedy, and often finds an echo in the cult of slapstick, comedian and low forms of comedy in particular. It has been recently revived in and through the writings of Bakhtin (1965), and in and through the work of those, like Fischer (1991), Paul (1994), Perlmutter (1991), Rowe (1995) and Winokur (1996), who have employed Bakhtinian notions, especially their stress upon the upturning of the social world and its rules in all forms of carnival comedy. See Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, (2000, London and New York: Routledge).

- <sup>10</sup> The issue of the importance of English language at the expense of marginalizing the Malay language as the national language has engendered many debates throughout the country. For instance, the debate on the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English which has brought out the worst in all Malaysians. It appears every other group has published research papers favouring their point of view.
- <sup>11</sup> The issue of elevating the Malay language as the national language has been relentlessly debated and discoursed. For example, the Penang state government's (run by the opposition) decision to put up street names and road signs in multiple languages at heritage areas in Penang for the benefit of tourists and visitors has engendered heated debates and discussions; some say that such effort is an attempt to denigrate the status of Malay as national language, whilst some say such issue has been politicized.
- <sup>12</sup> According to Tenas Effendy, a cultural activist from Riau, in his paper presented at a Seminar on Nusantara Kris at Universiti Malaya, the kris is a manifest of cultural heritage which possesses an amalgam of dimensional attributes, having both explicit and implicit values, as well as symbolic characteristics attributed to the sacred and temporal. In general, the kris is conceived of as symbols of luck and dignity. Other symbolic roles associated with the kris include masculinity, pride and dignity, adoration and reverence, and etc. All this is mentioned by Firdaus Abdullah in his article in *Utusan Malaysia*, "Dimensi Keris Melayu" (lit. Dimension of Malay Kris), (11 December, 2008), p.11.
- <sup>13</sup> Of this point, the director Mamat Khalid himself admitted that the two recurring images – the kris and full moon do have political connotations (representing both political parties' logo) as he attempted at poking fun at both political parties (Statement by Mamat Khalid at a talk on the film at Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, November 2008).
- <sup>14</sup> The 2006 UMNO Annual General Assembly was noted for controversial statements made by several delegates. A politician brandished the kris at the assembly that year. The assembly was the first to have its entire proceedings televised in full. Several delegates raised the issue of the Malay agenda, and called for greater



enforcement of the NEP. The politician defended his usage of the kris, saying it was “meant to motivate the Malays” and that it “is here to stay,” denying that it was a symbol of Malay supremacy.

- 15 The party is Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Their logo and flag is simply green charged with a white circle (representing the moon).
- 16 Farish A. Noor (2006), in his insightful essay about the kris, asserts that it would not be possible to delve too deeply into the Trantic influences on the kris in such an article, as the tantric aspects of the kris and kris-lore can be seen in the symbolism contained in it. As Farish further states:

The keris, it has to be remembered, is a composite object: It consists of the blade (*mata keris*) as well as the sheath (*sarong keris*); and in the symbolic coupling of the two (the keris inserted into the sheath or sarong) we see the symbolic enactment of the sexual act of copulation or intercourse. Here the upright keris assumes its phallic identity as the penetrating element (*linggam*), while the sheath assumes the status of penetrated object (*yonis*). (p. 8)

- 17 The 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysian general election was held on March 8, 2008. As with all preceding general elections following independence, the parliamentary election was won by Barisan National (BN) – the ruling political alliance since independence, but yielded one of the worst results in the coalition’s history. Opposition parties had won 82 seats (out of 222 seats in parliament) or 36.9% of parliamentary seats, while BN only managing to secure the remaining 140 seats or 63.1%. It marked also the first time since the 1969 election that the coalition did not win a two-thirds supermajority in the Malaysian Parliament required to pass amendments to the Malaysian Constitution. In addition, 5 of 13 state legislatures were won by the opposition, compared with only one in the last election. However, it is clear that, albeit addressing subtle criticism of Malaysian social and politics which seems surprisingly timely and relevant, *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* was indeed made and released before March 2008.

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